

Wyspiański's Krakow. The non-existent centre

Krakow, city of Wyspiański? Which Krakow? The one from a century ago, that still remembers the funeral procession carrying the artist's body from St Mary's Church to the crypts at the church on Skałka – the Rock? Or today's one, in which the staff of institutions at Szczepański Square and Kanonicza Street shrug helplessly when tourists armed with outdated guidebooks ask them where to find the Wyspiański museum? The city of Wyspiański in which the famous "sapphire-blue studio" on Krowoderska Street has been searching for years for a patron to ensure its survival?

There is no "Wyspiański's Krakow" today, and in fact there never has been. A city which owes its fame as much to the artists of the Piast and Jagiellonian dynasties as to those working when Juliusz Leo was mayor early in the 20th century never repaid its debt of gratitude to them. In today's terms, it did not have the commercial nous to exploit and sell these goods, which remain extremely valuable, not just in Poland.

In modern Krakow, an artist who had such an important influence on 20th-century Polish art should have some kind of material centre as a cultural aide-mémoire. Not so much a collection of works

and objects, but a space filled with traces, signposts and maps that would play a triple role.

This would firstly depict Wyspiański's oeuvre in all its richness and diversity. Using various media techniques, one could attempt to create a synthesis of what was contained in Wyspiański's artistic accomplishments in the fields of literature, painting, theatre, editing and applied art. A modern complete works collection does not always require the originals (museumologists' explanations of how pastels may not be exhibited would be no justification for leaving out many beautiful pictures from our "museum of the imagination"). The idea of "the artist's room," close to Wyspiański's own heart, could be picked up as the space somewhere between reality and fantasy to which the heroes of dramas come, memories return and images come to life. For him, every place was a space to fill – this was the case with the wedding chamber in *The Wedding*, the cathedral nave in *Acropolis*, the theatre stage in *Liberation* – a social organism when, as a member of the City Council, he had ambitious plans for reform. Wyspiański saw Krakow as a continual work in progress, an impulse for discovering the potentiality lying in every place. His imagination combined exuberant fantasy with the peculiar pragmatism of the architect, director and producer – these features of Wyspiański's original artistic personality should be taken into account by those responsible for designing his museum in Krakow. And it is worth reminding ourselves of how Wyspiański, playing the role of exhibition curator, appeared in the memoirs of Tadeusz Żuk-Skarszewski:

The young Wyspiański came to the National Museum to see the newly arranged Matejko room. How does he like it? Not bad. But he would have arranged it differently. [...] He explains how it should be: Matejko's pictures in the middle – good; but around them the paintings of others should be hung, against whose background what makes Matejko different would be apparent. And he set about describing every picture separately; someone noted that there were no such pictures. Wyspiański shrugged. What could be easier than painting them?¹

Secondly, this “centre,” placing Wyspiański in the space of Krakow that was closest to him, would constitute a starting point for a wander around the actual places where his works and souvenirs are preserved. It would mean that the possible trajectories for a trip around Krakow would be marked out, the directions pointed out, a city map created with a key titled “Wyspiański.” How could these trails be designed? The possibilities are numerous, and the linear mode always seems simplest and yet extremely banal: a biographical trail (from Krupnicza Street to the Długosz House, via the Larisch Palace, Nowodworski High School, further schools and homes, right up to the village of Węgrzce and then Skalka); a literary trail (including Wawel, the “Bronowice cottage”, the Municipal Theatre), a stained-glass windows and wall decoration trail (the Franciscan Church, St Mary's, Church of the Holy Cross, Medical Society House) etc. But these separate lines should form a web showing connections and ties that are much more interesting than the main

routes. Much depends on accepting the principle of searching for the presence of the artist between the transience of the biography and the material nature of the work, or vice-versa, between the transience of the work and the material nature of the biography. Perhaps one of the threads of this web would show Wyspiański the technical invention enthusiast; as Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński said, half-jokingly: “If the management of the railways came to him asking for a design for a locomotive, [...] the next day Wyspiański would bring a sketch of his understanding of a model locomotive.”² Another track might be marked out by Wyspiański's culinary tastes – for example his less sophisticated liking for frankfurters and beer (he preferred this to stronger alcohol, saying that he had visions even without vodka), which he indulged in at the Rosenstock pub by the train station on Lubicz Street. Or why not follow the path of Wyspiański's colours, from the greens, yellows and purples of the Franciscan stained glass, the bright and dark blue of the circles and figures of the *Apollo: The Copernican Solar System* window, via the delicate shades of pastels or paint, the reflections of light and dark, with which he imbued the wedding chamber in his play, to the sapphire-blue walls of his studio. Or even a trail of sounds, listening to the tune of the Krakow clocks which he inserted into *Acropolis*.

There is one more type of trajectory of senses: that of seeing, the “looking differently” of which he was so proud. Which sights did he retain in his visual memory? When his worsening health left him “imprisoned” in his flat on Krowoderska Street

and his eyes at different times of day and in various seasons gazed towards Kościuszko Mound. We know from his letters/confessions that he saw through the wall of his studio then, so that in his mind's eye he could join Stanisław Lack and see Venice:

When I look towards the wall of my studio [...] I see you in a gondola gazing straight at me from afar and I see and hear the gondola approaching and reaching the shore and you are to alight – when a wagon rumbles up Krowoderska Street [...] and the wall is a wall with stars from hammered nails and you – you alight at St Mark's Square or on the Lido.³

Thirdly, “the centre” would have the function of showing Wyspiański in a changing time of culture providing ever different contexts and continuations. As we know, the 20th century produced

a multiple portrait of the author of *The Wedding*: it revealed the importance of the legacy of his work, as well as exposing the depletion of the inspirations that came from him.

The Krakow of 2014 is above all the city of Tadeusz Kantor, who knew Wyspiański by heart while still at school in Tarnów; in later years, he learnt painting and theatre from him, as well as what comes about between these arts.

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NOTES

- 1 Tadeusz Żuk-Skarszewski, *W natchnieniu i w życiu codziennym*, [in:] *Wyspiański w oczach współczesnych*, ed. Leon Płoszewski, v. II, Kraków 1971, p. 115.
- 2 Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, *Historia pewnych mebli* [shortened], [in:] *Wyspiański w oczach współczesnych*, p. 213.
- 3 Stanisław Wyspiański, *Listy do Stanisława Lacka* (1905), Kraków 1957, p. 46.



Trumna z ciałem Stanisława Wyspiańskiego pod kościołem Mariackim, fot. nieznany, „Nowości Ilustrowane”, Kraków 1907, nr 49, s. 3. Przedruk z katalogu wystawy „Sami złożycie stos”. Pogrzb Stanisława Wyspiańskiego, zorganizowanej przez Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, grudzień 2007 – marzec 2008.